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AUTHOR Imel, Susan
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ABSTRACT

The use of small groups in adult literacy and basic education has been stimulated by a desire to provide a more learner-centered and collaborative learning environment. Another set of factors promoting their use is related to increased use of language experience or whole language as instructional approaches in adult literacy and basic education. Major advantages of the small group approach are as follows: it allows for integration of critical thinking, permits learners to expand their repertoire of learning strategies, breaks down the isolation and provides peer support, enhances learners' self-esteem, and creates a cooperative participative environment. There are three major disadvantages: difficulty in accommodating a wide range of needs and abilities; reconciliation of individuals' needs with the group's needs; negotiation of a learner-centered curriculum; and more preparation time. Effective groups are small, learner centered, experiential, cooperative, and participatory. Implementation considerations include selecting and training leaders, assigning learners to groups, choosing materials, and assessing learner progress. (Some resources for further information about the small group approach are listed. Nine references are included.) (YLB)

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Small Groups in Adult Literacy and Basic Education

by Susan Imel

1992

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Traditionally, a one-on-one, individualized approach to instruction has predominated in adult literacy and basic education (Bingham et al. 1990; Roskos 1990). According to Ennis (1990), this approach has been supported by the assumption that "confidentiality was a treasured principle . . . and [it] implicitly helped sustain the notion that literacy is a private matter, a process of individuals developing skills for their own personal use" (p. 105). Recently, the use of groups has been advocated as an effective approach for delivering adult literacy and basic education. Although support for the use of the small group approach is expanding, little empirical evidence exists documenting its effectiveness. However, a growing body of practice-based literature chronicles the experiences of adult literacy and basic education programs that have used the small group approach.

This ***ERIC Digest*** examines the emergence of the small group approach. First, the rationale underlying the use of groups, including their advantages and disadvantages, is explored. Next, the characteristics of effective groups are discussed and some implementation considerations are raised. The ***Digest*** concludes with a list of resources that can be consulted for additional information.

Why Use Small Groups?

A number of factors have converged to stimulate the use of small groups in adult literacy and basic education. A desire to provide a learning environment that is more learner centered and collaborative has been a major catalyst for the use of small groups. Advocates of this approach also suggest that small groups more accurately reflect the contexts in which adults generally use literacy skills. Use of this approach acknowledges that literacy is a social process (Bingham et al. 1990; Ennis 1990).

Another set of factors promoting the use of small groups is related to the increased use of language experience or whole language as instructional approaches in adult literacy and basic education. Because these approaches use both written and oral language for "personally meaningful purposes while learning through active processes in the social community of the classroom," they use small groups to incorporate personal experiences into adult literacy development (Roskos 1990, p. 6).

Most proponents of the small group approach do not suggest that it supplant other approaches; rather they suggest that it be used in combination with one-on-one and/or large group instruction (Bingham et al. 1990; Ennis and Davison 1989; Gaber-Katz and Watson 1990). They also acknowledge that the use of small groups has both advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages

Major advantages of the small group approach, synthesized from a number of sources (Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit 1982; Bingham et al. 1990; Cheatham and Lawson 1990; Ennis 1990; Ennis and Davison 1989; Gaber-Katz and Watson 1990), include the following:

- It allows for integration of critical thinking and other language processes. Talking, listening, writing, and reading can be interrelated, and the spoken word can interact with the written word.
- By creating opportunities for learners to experience and observe the learning of others, it permits them to expand their repertoire of learning strategies.
- It breaks down the isolation and stigma frequently experienced by adults with insufficient literacy skills and provides peer support for their learning.
- It enhances learners' self-esteem by helping them understand that they have much to offer as a result of their experiences.
- Through the collective expertise of the group members, it makes available a wide range of resources, including the thinking, experience, help, and encouragement of other group members.
- It eases the distinction between teachers/tutors and learners by creating a cooperative, participative environment that is less hierarchical than environments produced by traditional approaches.

Disadvantages

Major disadvantages of the small group approach, synthesized from several sources (Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit 1982; Bingham et al. 1990; Gaber-Katz and Watson 1990; and Ottoson et al. 1985), include the following:

- Accommodating a wide range of needs and abilities is difficult in a small group. Learners may not only have conflicting goals but also different rates of learning.
- The needs of individuals in a group have to be reconciled with the needs of the group as a whole and thus tension may arise between learner-centeredness and a group-centered or collective approach.
- Negotiating a learner-centered curriculum in a group can be very hard work.
- Compared to one-on-one tutoring, a small group requires more preparation time. Ottoson et al. (1985) suggest it may double preparation time.
- Some learners are simply not comfortable with the idea of group participation.
- In addition to teaching skills, tutors/teachers also need group leadership skills for the group to be successful.

What Are the Characteristics of Effective Groups?

Simply meeting in a small group does not constitute an effective learning environment. Cheatham and Lawson (1990) suggest that adult literacy and basic education small groups often fall into one of four categories: dysfunctional (no participation from members); leaderless (no exchange of ideas); on-task (willing to talk and listen but no sharing of meaningful information); and functioning (on-task and involved). The ideal is *functioning* because there is a sense of trust and an expectation that learning will occur. Most groups go through several stages, however, before they meet the definition of a functioning group.

According to Bingham et al. (1990) effective groups are–

- small in size, ranging from 5 to 15 learners;
- learner centered, in that they seek to adapt the curriculum to the needs and interests of learners;
- experiential, in that they seek to incorporate learners' experiences, skills, and ideas in the teaching;
- cooperative, in that learners commonly help each other and work together; and
- participatory, in that learners have a say in what is taught and how it is taught, rather than being passive recipients (p. 2).

In addition, the role of the teacher/tutor is that of a facilitator of learning and leader rather than that of a person conveying information (ibid.).

What Are Some Implementation Considerations?

Among the many areas that need to be considered when implementing the small group approach, the most important are selecting and training leaders, assigning learners to groups, choosing materials, and assessing learner progress. Not every teacher/tutor may possess the characteristics or skills necessary to be an effective group leader. Facilitating a small group requires a willingness to adjust one's leadership style to the developmental stages of the group. For example, the early stages of a group's life may demand a more directive style, whereas in later stages a more participative style would be appropriate (Ottoson 1985). Initial training and ongoing staff development should be available to support teachers/tutors in assuming new roles (Roskos 1990).

Making appropriate group assignments for learners is another consideration. Both situational barriers, such as time and location, and psychosocial barriers, such as resistance to the idea of participating in a small group, have to be addressed. One program successfully used a monthly orientation session to introduce learners to the small group approach (Bingham et al. 1990).

Use of the small group approach will likely require a greater variety of instructional materials. Because of small groups' learner-centered approach, published curricula may not fit learner interests. For example, in Eastern Tennessee, programs use a substantial amount of teacher-prepared materials that have been developed from learners' interests in conjunction with published materials (ibid.).

Although assessment of individuals may be required for both diagnosis and evaluation, those implementing the small group approach may wish to develop additional, alternative forms of assessing learners' progress. Programs in Eastern Tennessee use a variety of alternative methods of assessment, including sustained silent reading in which the learner keeps track of rate of speed; a portfolio of writing that permits the student to see progress; and student-developed checklists, charts, or graphs for plotting successful uses of literacy (ibid.).

What Are Some Resources for Further Information?

All of the references listed here will provide additional information about the small group approach. Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (1982), Cheatham and Lawson (1990), and Ottoson et al. (1985) contain guidelines for implementing small groups. Bingham et al. (1990) is based on first-hand accounts of the experiences of both leaders and learners in the small group approach. In addition to general information about the small group approach, Ennis and Davison (1989) contains reports of a variety of small groups that were implemented in Australia. These descriptions contain examples of instructional materials. The Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council (1991) report describes the use of the small group approach in math instruction. Although the research studies by Gaber-Katz and Watson (1990) and Roskos (1990) are not specifically about the small group approach, both contain information that supports the method.

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THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
1900 KENNY ROAD • COLUMBUS, OHIO 43210